

Ash Wednesday 2021 Pastor Bill Uetricht

A couple of weeks ago, Father Pat Finn, a friend and a participant in our community of faith, and I were discussing the reality of ashes in the time of a pandemic. He said that some clergy folks that he knew were all in an uproar because they didn't know how to do ashes in light of the restrictions caused by Covid 19. He either said to them or he thought to himself, "Do people need yet another reminder of their mortality? Hasn't Covid taken care of that quite well?"

I thought he had an interesting point. Covid has done an excellent job of reminding us that we all mortal, that we all have limits, that life is a whole lot bigger than us. So maybe we should just throw out the ashes. Forget them. How depressed do we really need to make people feel?

Pat is right. Sometimes we don't need to be reminded. Even when we are young, life reminds us. A pandemic reminds us. Sometimes it's a no-brainer! But Pat, I still think ashes are the right move. We've been living Lent, but still we need to do Lent again. It's what people of faith do. We go into the darkness.

In his book, ***Everything Belongs***, Richard Rohr writes:

We seldom go freely into the belly of the beast. ... As a culture, we have to be taught the language of descent. That is the language of religion. It teaches us to enter willingly, trustingly into the dark period of life. These dark periods are good teachers. Religious energy is in the dark questions, seldom in the answers. Answers are the way out, but ... when we look at the questions, we look for the opening to transformation.

We need Lent. We need to go into the dark places, even when sometimes we would rather not. And we need to do more than just stick our toes in those dark places. Our Wednesday night services are going to be all about going deeper into the hard places. That, primarily,

is the task of religion—to take us to the deeper places. And those deeper places often are darker places.

We start tonight by going deeper into the wilderness. Then next week we will go deeper into the denial of the self, then on the following Wednesday, deeper into the anger of Jesus, and then deeper into love, then deeper into the now, and finally, during the last Lenten service, deeper into the passion of Jesus. We go deeper, discovering the dark questions, knowing that initially the questions are as significant as the answers.

Although the church has been there before, every year at this time, we go there again. We go into Lent, deep into the wilderness. Admittedly, some people and some religious expressions would rather avoid going there. It's all too depressing, they say. So, they skip over Lent, going right to Easter. They say, "he's raised" long before they even admit that he died.

But I wonder if you notice that every person of religious depth and every community of religious substance spends time in the wilderness, and sometimes it is no small amount of time. The Israelites roamed in the wilderness for forty years, wandering and wondering—wandering the wilderness which clearly wasn't their ultimate home, and wondering where God is all of their wandering. Life was hard there. But they had to go there. The wilderness had to come before the promised land.

Jesus also went into the wilderness. The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus got baptized and then was immediately driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan. The Spirit took him into the wilderness. He had to go there. It wasn't an overnight experience. Like Noah's experience, it was a forty-day event.

The wilderness is where people of depth go. Or maybe better put, the wilderness is often what brings people into a life that is much

deeper. I have said to myself, to members of my family, to other people that sometimes until some people go into the wilderness, they will remain pretty shallow, won't get any better. Sometimes, some people are forced into that wilderness. They have avoided Lent with the best of them. In fact, much of their life has been about avoiding Lent, avoiding the wilderness, avoiding the pain. I was so taken the other day by a James Baldwin quote:

I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.

So much anger, so much hate is rooted in the unwillingness to go into the wilderness of the pain. Stay with the anger, stay with the hate and you can avoid dealing with the pain that is underneath it all. And you then will lack depth and ultimately, probably healing.

The church says, "Go into the wilderness and stay there for a while." And we will give you a template. It's called Lent. We're providing you an opportunity to face the hard. And you should know this: we are *all* going there. We all are going to spend some time in the wilderness. Together we can look into the darkness.

A significant part of the observance of Lent has been the reliance on disciplines. Our gospel reading for tonight speaks of prayer, giving, and, fasting, some of the traditional disciplines of Lent. I think it is good to practice these disciplines. Now I note what Jesus says in the Gospel reading that some of these disciplines can be mere show. They can lack substance, clearly not taking us to the deeper places. Yet in a world in which discipline is often neglected, I find Lent's invitation to commit to discipline to be refreshing and potentially life-giving.

I wonder if this year your disciplines and my disciplines could focus on those practices that help us go deeper, those practices that help us look into the darkness, maybe even the darkness of our own souls. There are a lot of layers that we place on the top of our lives,

layers that keep us from having to face ourselves. Our opinions, our computers, our phones, our anger, our arrogance, our addictions—they can prevent us from dealing with ourselves, facing our hurt, naming our pain, and working through all those things. What disciplines related to these realities will enable us to face the darkness, to ask the hard questions of ourselves and even of God, to enter the belly of the beast?

Lent is about entering the belly of the beast. The end of Lent will take us to the cross. And what is darker than the cross? What symbol says more about the human condition than the cross? Interestingly enough though, this symbol, this ugly reality, according to church teaching, will reveal to us the deep, deep love of God. We'll go deep in the darkness only to be discovered by a light that will outshine the darkness. Cover my forehead with ashes, then, again. Send me deep into the wilderness, again. Love is inviting me.